

Montagnards Have Unwelcome Guests

Trouble in Viet Highlands

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BANMETHUOT, South Vietnam—There was a time when the only creatures being hunted in these jungle highlands were nonmilitary tigers and other wild beasts.

In those long-gone days, the stocky and backward hill people whom the French called "montagnards" were often used to beat through the jungle so that the quarry would be driven into the hunter's paths.

Today there are armed Americans living in former Emperor Bao Dai's hunting lodge, but things are not going too well. The Americans are not the most welcome of guests, the montagnards are still childlike but no longer cheerful, and the quarry which has replaced the tiger—the Vietcong—knows that the hunters are uneasy among themselves.

The trouble is that in the years since the funloving Bao Dai filled his lodge with hunters (most of whom were female), the lowland Vietnamese have come into the highlands. And they despise the backward ethnically distinct montagnards. As long as that condition exists, there is bound to be trouble in the highlands.

Land Title an Issue

The montagnards felt with good reason that the government had only been paying lip service to their complaints. One of their most serious concerns was that they had never held clear title to the land on which they had lived for so long, and they bitterly resented being pushed farther away by the more clever Vietnamese who flooded into the highlands in Diem's time.

Then there was the complicating presence of the Americans. For years the Special Forces have trained, equipped and led the montagnards in "strike forces" — these are small units operating from lonely and frequently vulnerable outposts scattered throughout the highlands, aimed at cutting Vietcong supply lines through the Ho Chi Minh trail and generally harassing the enemy at his own

After last year's rebellion many disaffected montagnards took their weapons and their families to join a shadowy movement called Fulro, the Unified Front for the Struggle of the Oppressed Race. The movement was based in Cambodia in the border area and directed by a dynamic leader of the Rhade tribe in his mid-40s, known as Y Bham. This man had been jailed for five years by Diem following the 1958 rebellion and was freed only when Lt. Gen. Nguyen Khanh came to power, and briefly appointed him as director of montagnard affairs.

The Saigon administration seems bound to woo the montagnards with one hand and wound them with the other. This week, for example, they sent a planeload of government officials here to set up "La Direction Speciale des Affaires Montagnards" or Montagnard Affairs Bureau. It was given an impressive budget to clean up and repair an old French building placed at its disposal, and it will have a fulltime staff of some 30 people, working just two blocks away from the hunting lodge.

But its director will be a Vietnamese, not a montagnard. True, his superior in Saigon will be a montagnard

who has reached the rank of colonel, but the man who directs montagnard affairs throughout these highland provinces will not be one himself.

Earlier this month when a Vietnamese show of marine force nipped another incipient rebellion in the bud, the Prime Minister, Brig. Gen. Nguyen Cao Ky, flew up here to accept the "allegiance" of those disaffected tribesmen. A number of them and a few of their womenfolk were shipped off to a military training and rehabilitation center, and the plan is that in 16 weeks they will be brought back and integrated into the armed forces to defend their own areas.

But in assuring the montagnards that the government would take a more active role in meeting their legitimate claims, the Prime Minister and the War Minister roundly denounced FULRO for being

That's the most asinine statement I ever heard," remarked one American officer here. "The montagnards are more violently anti-Vietcong than Saigon could ever hope to be. They're against the Vietcong for the simple reason that the Vietcong push them around, try to force them into being porters — things like that. They don't know what communism means but they know they don't like the Vietcong."

A missionary here is convinced that the chief concern of Y Bham today is to protect his own people from the Vietcong, rather than to tackle Saigon. So many of his people began trickling over toward Cambodia in the past year that the leader became concerned that the Vietcong would move into this vacuum, and he wants his followers to stay home where they can defend themselves.

If the montagnards, who account for more than 60 percent of this province's 187,000 population, had greater reason to feel that Saigon was for them and not against them, the military situation here would be far better. The government could afford to divert some of its scarce troops to other areas.

However, the Vietnamese government has largely by its own attitude created conditions which have produced a war within a war, at least the ever-present threat of one. The greatest change needed is a change of attitude, but no one should hold his breath in expectation of this.

Here in this huge hunting lodge, the Americans who advise the 23d Division are walking on eggs. They have been told in no uncertain terms from U.S. headquarters in Saigon to avoid discussions of montagnard affairs like the plague, and they make this known to any visiting newspaperman as soon as he enters the compound.

Things are comfortable in the lodge. An enterprising engineer officer installed a filtration plant, which means that water can be drunk from the tap, something almost unheard of throughout Asia.

the food is reasonably good, and in the mountains a man sleeps under a blanket in the cool evenings.

That is, when he becomes accustomed to the strange assortment of purely Western noises that assault his ears at night.

At nightfall this week, even the steady drumming of a monsoon rain could not obliterate the wildly disparate racket that drifted in from all angles in the darkness.

At one incredible moment this Tuesday night, it was possible to identify simultaneously a male quartet belting out "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" into an echo chamber, a symphonic rendition of the prelude to the third act of "Lohengrin," and Kate Smith belting out "God Bless America."

History does not record what music soothed the harp of Bao Dai's hunters as they prepared for bed, but it could hardly have approached the wild cacophony of sound that lulls this generation of American marksmen.